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RUEHIL/AMEMBASSY ISLAMABAD PRIORITY 1726
RUEHBUL/AMEMBASSY KABUL PRIORITY 0470
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RHEFDIA/DIA WASHINGTON DC//DHO-2/REA/NMJIC-J2// PRIORITY
RHEHNSC/NSC WASHDC PRIORITY
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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 03 ASHGABAT 001303

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DEPT FOR SCA

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TAGS: [PREL](#) [PGOV](#) [TX](#) [US](#)
SUBJECT: DEATH OF NIYAZOV SITREP 004: 12/26/2006

REF: A. ASHGABAT 1295
[1](#)B. ASHGABAT 1292
[1](#)C. ASHGABAT 1289

Classified By: Charge d'Affaires a.i. Jennifer L. Brush for reasons 1.4
(B) and (D).

Summary

[1](#)1. (C) Interim President Berdimuhammedov, for all intents and purposes, was elected president at the December 26 session of the People's Council. The actual election is February 11, but his competition of five low-level unknown bureaucrats is a joke, and Berdimuhammedov had to "fight back" the council's desire to elect him then and there, saying "the world is watching us, let's follow our laws." Turkmenistan remains quiet throughout the December 24 funeral of President Niyazov and the December 26 meeting of the People's Council. Amid a heavier than usual police presence, Turkmenistan's citizens go on with their lives, though many have expressed fear over the prospects for future stability. Turkmenistan's institutions are functioning and Berdimuhammedov is trying to build public support by promising to pay salaries on time, double wages in 2008 and guarantee free utilities through 2030. While there continue to be rumors of political maneuvering, Parliamentary speaker Atayev remains the only confirmed victim to date. Regional leaders turned out for the president's funeral, though European leaders -- including Putin -- ignored the activities. A/S Boucher's presence was very well received and he was able to deliver the U.S. message of hope for a new relationship. End Summary.

People's Council Meeting: Berdimuhammedov Nominated
"Unanimously;" Election Set for February 11

[1](#)2. (U) During a December 26 session of the Halk Maslahaty (People's Council), the body empowered to set the date of elections and change the constitution, members agreed to hold presidential elections February 11. They also reportedly made the necessary changes to the constitution and the election law to clear the way for Berdimuhammedov's election. After four hours of "nominations" from the regions and a laborious, predictable and repetitive process of counting

yeas, nays and abstentions for each nominee, the Democratic Party Chairman gave an impassioned speech in favor of Berdimuhammedov and, after unanimous approval of the nomination, Elections Commission Chief Garriyev begged the council to declare Berimuhammedov president on the spot. "No," Berdimuhammedov insisted, "the world is watching us, let's go through with our elections." In addition to Berdimuhammedov's unanimous nomination, five other candidates barely received the 2/3's votes required to be nominated. The "competition" consists of five low-level unknown local politicians ranging from Mayor of Turkmenbashi, to Deputy Minister of Oil, to Governor of Owadan District, to Deputy Governor of Dashoguz Province. Garriyev, the Chairman of the Election Commission, announced that "Our goal, our desire is to have Berdimuhammedov elected." Post will report in more detail septel.

Atmosphere Quiet as Police Presence Increases Exponentially

13. (C) Ashgabat has remained quiet the last three days; the police presence on the streets increased exponentially on December 23 in preparation for the funeral services and the arrival of a number of high-level heads of state/government. Most restaurants, stores and markets were closed December 24 and most streets in downtown Ashgabat were blocked off to normal traffic in order to promote a smoother flow of traffic by funeral participants. Although streets and many markets reopened December 25, police presence remained heavier than usual -- likely because of the meeting of the Halk Maslahaty (People's Council) on December 26. People have been going on with their daily lives -- buying food, working, going to school -- but the mood is somber and apprehensive, and there

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has been little joking or good cheer that normally is present in the run-up to the New Year's holiday. A number of contacts here have expressed fear over the future and a wish that the political situation will improve -- or, at least, remain stable and without political maneuvering. Prices have not risen as they normally do prior to the New Year's holiday; the super-cheap subsidized "bricks" have disappeared once again from state bread stores, though the slightly more expensive flat bread remains available. Gas and Go reports that the airport is functioning normally. Given reports that all is quiet in the provinces, Peace Corps volunteers slowly are being sent back out to the field: T-14 volunteers departed Ashgabat December 26, and the newly sworn-in T-15 volunteers will be sent out December 27 and 28. The embassy is continuing to function normally and to offer the full range of consular services.

Parliament Elects a New Speaker

14. (C) The state-run media focused December 23 on an extraordinary session of the Mejlis (Parliament), in which the body's Speaker, Owezgeldi Atayev, was excoriated and his alleged "crimes" were spelled out to Mejlis members, who unanimously approved a decision removing him from office. Specifically, Atayev was accused of abuse of office, grossly violating citizens' constitutional rights, and fomenting ethnic unrest by opposing a marriage between his adopted son, an ethnic Teke, to a member of the Nohur tribe, causing the girl to attempt suicide. Atayev's successor, Akja Nurberdiyeva, is a former deputy speaker. An embassy employee who knew Nurberdiyeva before she became a parliamentarian notes that Nurberdiyeva helped in the past with a number of grants related to orphanages, troubled teenagers, pensioners and other marginalized groups, and put much time into her work. The employee also characterized her as quite progressive and positive. She has two children, is around the same age as Acting President Gurbanguly Berdimuhammedov, and has been married twice.

15. (C) At a meeting of the Council of Ministers late on

December 23, Berdimuhammedov formally vacated his position as Minister of Health and the Pharmaceutical Industry; he was replaced by Basim Sopiev. (Comment: USAID has had an excellent working relationship with Sopiev. End Comment.) The Council of Ministers also emphasized that domestic and foreign policy would continue the same direction. A contact at the Turkish construction company, Gap Inshaat, a major beneficiary of Niyazov's building projects, told Charge that one of Niyazov's last expressed wishes was for construction to continue on "his" projects; construction on already-contracted buildings remained on-going, with no work stoppages during the mourning period. However, no new building had been commissioned. Turkmenistan's newspapers continue to run above-the-fold front-page pictures of Niyazov, rather than Berdimuhammedov.

¶6. (C) There continue to be rumors of a political split, with Minister of Defense Agageldi Mammetgeldiyev having thrown his support, at least initially, behind Mejlis Speaker Atayev. However, Mammetgeldiyev's presence with the rest of the Council of Ministers at the December 26 session of the Halk Maslahaty (People's Council) belied reports in the opposition press that he had been arrested.

Funeral Activities and A/S Boucher's Visit -----

¶7. (SBU) The focus of the embassy -- and the state-run media -- shifted on December 23 to preparations for the upcoming funeral activities. MFA reportedly was cast into confusion, as it sought to figure out how to work visits by dozens of high-level delegations. Central Asian presidents Rahmonov (Tajikistan) and Nazarbayev (Kazakhstan), Afghanistani president Karzai, Ukrainian Prime Minister Yanukovich, Pakistani Prime Minister Aziz and Prime Minister Fradkov of the Russian Federation, and PRC State Councilor Tang Jiaxuan were among those who attended. Turkish Prime Minister Erdogan led a delegation of nearly 200. Iranian President

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Ahmadinejad sent first Vice President Parviz Davoudi and Foreign Minister Mottaki to Ashgabat for the ceremonies.

¶8. (SBU) Assistant Secretary Boucher arrived safely and was met upon his arrival by Turkmenistan's Agriculture Minister, Esenmurat Orazgeldiyev, and the chief of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs' Americas Section, Serdar Bashimov. Although the A/S did not meet separately with either Berdimuhammedov or Foreign Minister Reshit Meredov -- the embassy was told immediately prior to the Assistant Secretary's arrival that a decision had been made to deny meetings to all foreign dignitaries -- the Assistant Secretary delivered the U.S. message while offering condolences to Berdimuhammedov; he also met with presidents Rahmonov and Karzai, and prime ministers Aziz and Erdogan. Readouts of the funeral activities and Boucher's discussions will follow septel. The Assistant Secretary also met with newly sworn-in Peace Corps volunteers and held a 25-minute press conference. Embassy is grateful for A/S Boucher's participation and for the clear message he delivered that the USG is ready for a new relationship with Turkmenistan.

¶9. (U) Reaction in the state-run Turkmenistan press has been largely factual, although television coverage of A/S Boucher's visit stated that he expressed the "deep grief of the American people." Regional media coverage was largely favorable, though there was some confusion whether Boucher had a separate meeting with Berdimuhammedov. Russian's black media machine has been busy churning out reports that the U.S. murdered Niyazov, was planning to stage another color revolution in Turkmenistan, and hoped to use Niyazov's death to strengthen its position in Turkmenistan. Post will offer detailed media reaction septel.

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